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Undergraduate Research

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Untitled: Works In Florid Labor

The standards of social expectations and visual representations of women are often idealized and avail little fluctuation to maintain acceptability. Representations of women subsequently lack the honesty in expressing the vulnerability and pressures of lived experienced or the confines of occupying a conventional space of femininity. I have found these constraints to be most prevalent within the home, as it still maintains a sense of belonging to the feminine domain. In my research, I explore this complication of expression as I investigate the pressures and sentiments of age, memory, femininity and their relation to the domestic space. I have examined these social aspects through personal narrative in relation to art history, medium, process and labor.

The use of personal narrative has allowed me to address societal discourses relating to womanhood in relation to my own personal truths. It was important for this aspect of my research to build from this space of knowledge to contribute to manifesting an honest female representation. In the context of feminism and representation, the impact of specificities, like class and race, are too often omitted from conversation and present a blanket understanding of these discourses as truth for all, as opposed to some. It remained increasingly important

throughout my research to speak to these pressures from a firsthand account and allow them to be relatable or understandable through the visual and material approaches.

Historically, painting and photography have both been guilty of exploiting the female image. I have used photography throughout my research to address issues of the gaze. Susan Sontag has likened the act of photographing to a predatory action, like that of using a gun. The power dynamics of photography undeniably qualifies a level of trust from the photographer and the photographed. I have found this act of trust to exist as a sort of collaboration between both the photographer and photographed. In my self portraiture (*Untitled I and Untitled II*), I occupy both roles of photographer and photographed, and by doing so, I control the gaze.

Photographing my grandmother yielded similar results. Her reservations of being photographed were overshadowed by her trust in me being the one to wield the camera. Although each photograph begins with a staged scene, with the physical scene and photograph undergoing manipulation, the exchange of gaze is mutual; the viewer and the viewed are equally acknowledged.

Surrealism has also capitalized on the use of the male gaze. Surrealists made claims to the female image and role while exploiting their muses. The distortion of the female image in Surrealism exists solely as male desire and fantasy, mystery and madness; the other never the equal. Investigating and transposing these fabrications of femininity has been critical in attempts to reclaim the female image. My paintings can be placed into what I refer to as a “Spectrum of Surrealism”; a visual qualification ranging from realism to surrealism. I have used the prevalence of personal reality found in surrealism in the development of my own narrative and imagery. Self-portraiture has been my primary vehicle in depicting my imagery, as well as the use of my own muses. Collaboration with my muses has been a way of negotiating the use of the muse. It is

important that a sense of their agency be maintained in exchange for entertaining my captivation with them. The terms are not always the same. Both my grandmother and daughter preferred to pick the clothing they would be photographed in when participating as muse. A snapshot of my children sleeping was used as the photo reference for *In the Great Green Room* and *There Was a Telephone (Goodnight Moon; A Diptych)*, and their physical marks act in collaboration.

The approach of representation through the use of medium has remained significant. One question of central importance to my research has been the question of how to best use material to represent the female body, considering the historical use of oil paint to depict objects to be owned and of possession—including humans. In *twelve (Alle)*, I used soft pastel in rendering the figure of my daughter. Soft pastel is delicate, much like skin, and didn't carry the same material burden as oil paint or the plastic, commodity quality of acrylic. Although I found the material to be successful, the challenges of shifting between paint and pastel created areas of material tension that were not conducive to the conceptual or visual qualities of the painting. Oil paint represented itself as the least difficult in working across mediums. For *Untitled I* and *Untitled II*, I made a wax medium to mix into the oil paint for the rendering of the figure. The wax medium reduces the inherent luster of the oil paint, lessening its relationship to objecthood, and adds a softness that more accurately depicts flesh.

The combination of a classical approaches and collage elements are important in the rendering of my imagery. A classical approach to painting is most apparent in the construction and application of paint. The construction of the painting is layered as: the support, a gesso ground, an isolated layer of drawing, followed by glazed layers of paint. I draw the imagery using the grid method or projector to execute the information exactly. Next, a layer of glaze is used to establish the mid-tone and create a sense of three-dimensional space. The dimension achieved

through the use of transparent glazes is both constructional and conceptional. Indirect painting, like that in classical painting, is used throughout my paintings, in oil and acrylic. This application of paint in layers allows light to permeate through all layers and reflects back to the viewer, allowing them to simultaneously see all layers. The use of a glaze helps to unify color and control light, but its inherent transparency further contributes to being transparent in communicating an honest representation of women. The use of layering is reiterated in collage and mixed media applications. Various media, such as paper, prints and fabric, are collaged to physically layer onto a layer of glazed paint. The initial drawing and glaze layers can often be seen through various collage material and function similarly to the painted layers. Collage is used as an approach in contrast with the classical. The addition of collage disrupts the uniformity of the paint and draws a connection to the physicality of construction and slippage of material representation. These layers of representation are reminiscent of how social expectations of womanhood and feminine expression fluctuate and garner questions of proper representation.

The most notable progress I have made in the use of medium and discipline is through printmaking. I have used printmaking within my works, *Untitled I* and *Untitled II*, to replicate mechanically mass-produced items, like laundry and wallpaper. I see a connection between printing and its similarities in language and repetition to that of the repetitive nature of the every day and tasks within the domestic realm. *In the Great Green Room* and *There Was a Telephone (Goodnight Moon; A Diptych)*, I used Solarplate Etching, a photographic print process, to render a solemn moment of bedtime. Bedtime rituals are a repetitive process of their own, each occurrence involving a set of steps to produce the same result. The preparation of the Solarplate required similar care. The plate had to be placed in a bath after being exposed to light, blotted dry, allowed time for the emulsion to settle and then tucked away until the next day. Likewise, the

vocabulary (wipe, soak, press), repetition and labor of the intaglio process mimicked that found in the everyday.

The aspect of labor is reoccurring in all of my work. Labor maintains a sense of belonging to the feminine domain; birth labor, emotional labor, caretakers, housework. The confrontation of labor seemed a necessary layer in addressing the vulnerability and pressures related to the domestic space. *Untitled I* and *Untitled II* depict my attempts to find a sense of self-autonomy among the labor and societal expectation to occupy the home in a traditional way. The production of my paintings and prints are very labor intensive. The care and preparation of the supports, imagery and making all signify labor— both physically and conceptually. Pattern is a reoccurring aspect within my work as representative of labor. Various patterns are constructed within my paintings through the labor of printing and painting. It can most notably be found in my use of collaged laundry and wallpaper. Wallpaper occupies many roles within my research. I have personal associations of wallpaper through memory of lived spaces and watching my Great Aunt and Grandfather labors of hanging wallpaper as a trade. Historically, wallpaper once served as a form of insulation, providing a layer of warmth and comfort to the home. In *Untitled III*, is screen printed and hung to mimic traditional wallpaper. It serves as a physical support for the two works on panel. The photographic cameos portray the individuals throughout my life who have occupied the same role for me. The *Untitled* series not only depicts labor but is a product of labor.